Language between world theatre and theatre in exile[1]: From the impossible collective understanding to the possible collective imagination

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Theatre in Exile proposes a multilayered practice and theory space that engages with a complex system of thematic approaches, topics, and theoretical frameworks: migration, immigration, connectivity, and equality. Integration and diversity. Language, multilingualism, and identity. Structural racism, inclusivity and openness. Diaspora narratives and homeland. Collective imagination and individuality. Borders, barriers and cultural codes. Transnationality and intersectionality. Power structures and cultural margins. Politics and systems. Ethnicity, race, neoliberalism and postcolonialism. And THEATRE. A significant question in theatre in exile, which intensively comprises multilayered and interconnected themes, is language. Talking about language is a way to approach many connected debates, this essay provides methodological reflections we developed as a result of engaging with migrant theatre production in the period before 2022. Some of these reflections have evolved since then, but are principally valid now. It will try to capitulate on three of them: power structures and politics, audiences and spectators, and aesthetics and theatre genres. We will investigate the "One Language. Translation on Stage" project and explore the different approaches to dealing with multilingualism on stage and in the audience, such as visual alternatives to the spoken language and surtitling and translation as a dramaturgy and scenography practice.

One Language is a project launched by Nawras, a non-profit organisation founded in Berlin in 2017. It aims to create a series of collaborative artist-inclusive theatre laboratories to research what approaches could be meaningful to alternate classical translation methods on stage and suggest innovative attempts to better communicate between the artist and the audience. This paper will demonstrate artistic and translation practices as creative examples of dealing with language in theatre. For

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1 Although it is arguable, theatre-makers in exile is the term we chose to use in this essay. Not only artists but many others have different ways of self-identification. The term is not aimed at any political or social labeling but to identify a state of people who live in another country as a result of political or economic reasons.

this purpose, different scenes from different performances will be highlighted, as well as an interview with Sandra Hetzl, a literary translator from Arabic to German who has been working in theatre translation since 2013.

Influence of context change on the artistic practice

It is challenging to understand the adaptation of artistic practice following the shift in its creation and reception contexts. It is challenging as it differs significantly from one artist to another. It depends on the trajectory this artist has taken to arrive in the new country (context). Moreover, it depends on the artist's practice before this shift occurred and the artist's perception of their identity and career. Specifically, in the case of Syrian theatre-makers who have lived in Germany since around 2015, there is a layer of complexity in attempting to understand the shift in their practice. The complexity results from the possible ephemeral nature of the actual trial, as the arrival to a new context occurred less than ten years ago. Thus, the dynamic is foreseen to change the artistic practice and choices. Relationships with the audience greatly influence the artistic choices of artists in exile. Which story in which language and theatre genre? What emotional and cognitive connection should spectators live with the play, and how? What does the representation of an "Arabic theatre" mean, and to which audience exactly? Could the relation between an artistic production of an artist in exile and a German audience be safe from the "othering"? Is there a third fairer position of artists in exile other than Invisibility or Hyper-visibility?

Invisibility is when a particular group/individual is disempowered and/or unacknowledge and/or ignored and/or dehumanised for their 'differences'. There are typical double standards when treated and/or mentioned and/or spoken to or about. This could be happening on an individual or a systematic level.

Hyper-visibility is when an individual is being recognised for their otherness or deviance from the "norm". Hyper-visibility could lead to exclusion, social isolation, feeling of being used and/or being treated as a token, performance pressures and stress. Moreover, hypervisibility increases the concern that one will confirm certain negative stereotypes about one's group, which pushes people to act differently. (H. Settles & Buchanan & Dotson. 2018).

Among all the challenges raised, language and translation are central in the creation and reception manners. Rasha Abbas (a Syrian author who moved to Berlin in 2014) said she had written differently since she began to write with translation in mind. She knew how her translator worked, so she had used a language that would be easier to translate" (Dubois, Simon 2016). In his show, "Under a Low Sky" (2019), Wael Ali chose to collaborate with Sherif Andoura, an actor from a Belgian mother and a Syrian father. Andora was born and lived in Europe, and he played the leading role in the play alongside actress Nanda Muhammad, a Syrian actress residing in

Egypt. From the beginning, Ali mixed Arabic and French to write his text. The text is a round trip between the past and the present, a documentary theatre performance based on a flowing narrative and fragmented text that combines a personal record of the loss of the past and politics between two countries: France and Syria (Al-Charif, Bissane. 2021).

Further, Mudar Alhaggi, A Syrian playwright who moved to Berlin in 2015, says, "I can never imagine myself writing my plays in any language other than Arabic. Also, I cannot imagine the Syrian audience in Syria watching my last play, the Return of Danton." In "Reine Formsache", the play that joined Mudar Alhaggi and Wael Ali, the question of language is put forward on stage from the first scene: Die Geschichte (the story). Two actors sit and narrate how they arrived at this moment (here: Paris and now), when they left Syria, where to, and when they came to France, why they are playing in this closed room, and what problems they are discovering through playing. They also "inform" the audience about their physical characteristics. With his blue eyes and grey hair, he is unsuitable for the role of villain or terrorist or Mediterranean guy. Language is a question, they say. They keep playing in Arabic and talk about his incapability of playing in French. Still, just after they say so, they play the role of a theatre director in French, trying to convince a producer to invest in its production. They also narrate the story of the play they wrote in their closed room; what if she returns to Syria and at the border, she'd be grilled by some quite peculiar officer? Through this "story-telling", the actress narrates a particular Arabic genre of text called Dihliz. When she finishes, she confirms that Dihliz could not be translated, although a surtitling in German did not stop. The actress still explains the traditional use of Dihliz, taking spectators from the actual to another time where we can start our story. She says Dihliz is about the words' rhythm, sound and music.

Translation between communication and meaning-construction

Tobias Viet, Schaubühne's artistic executive producer, said: "Sometimes on the street, you hear more English or French than German, and these are people we think would be interested in our work". The assumption of a non-German audience has led the theatre to include two to three productions subtitled in English and two to three in French every month. According to Viet, the proposition of non-Germans in the audience has doubled to approximately 30 per cent on such nights (Brady-Brown, Annabel. 2012). Another reason for subtitling is introducing international guest performances to a German audience; Old Hebbel Theatre has done that since the mid-1990s. It is also a practice that we expect in international theatre festivals and encounters as a part of their mission to introduce international theatre to a local audience. Regarding Arabic theatre produced in Germany, the assumption that subtitling is needed to introduce international theatre to a German audience

deserves further examination. World theatre means travelling as a theatre or being a guest, crossing cultural borders to show something new and unusual to another world playfully. But world theatre is also present more and more within a city, be it in the Theater du Soleil in Paris, in the Gorki Theater in Berlin or the Theater an der Ruhr in Mülheim, wherever people from different cultures come to find new access to theatre (Griesel, Yvonne. 2014).

The perception of language as a medium for communication leads to understanding the spoken language on stage and translated written language on-screen on the linguistic and aesthetic levels. This approach allows us to look carefully at how good the translation is, technical matters such as synchronisation between the spoken and written word, and transferability of the original text's poetic feeling, all this summing up to question the experience the audience lived watching the performance. However, the perception of language as a medium to transmit emotional meaning and cultural context takes the question into a totally different debate concentrated around the artist's identity behind and on stage. In this sense, if you see language as the process of meaning-constructions, the politics of translation take on a massive life of its own. (Spivak, 2009).

Theatre-makers in exile are not theatre guests or touring artists. They are part of the city and the theatre scene where they live and practice. Artists in exile have moved from the middle to the margins of the cultural system in their countries of origin by leaving them to join a margin (s) in their new countries that do not yet influence creatively or politically. However, the change of prevailing systems and discourse is not the result of linear processes. The cultural margins can eventually play an influential role.

Simon Dubois argues in his essay "Renegotiating Artistic Identity in Exile: The Making of a Syrian Creative Landscape in Berlin" that we should look at exile not so much as a physical matter of moving from one place to another and/ or as a particular social and psychological condition, but instead as part of the Syrian artistic system reconfigured outside the country's borders. By choosing Beirut and Berlin as their residence places, the Syrian arts professionals had also chosen two culturally dynamic cities which were very open to international influences. Is it then fair to assume that this renegotiated identity of a sector restructuring itself outside the country's borders is highly influenced by limitations of translation and the constant need to "be explained" to an unknown audience? This position influences translation decisions and artistic choices centred around the constant questioning of the artist's ability to extract a particular meaning from the creative practice as a whole.

Thus, theatre-makers in exile live a different relation to translation than other theatre-makers who play internationally. Artists in exile have this audience in mind through the creative process and are looking at their theatre practice through the lenses of an unknown language, aesthetics, and audience. It also means that contrary to the reason behind translating theatre to allow local or international audience

access to a local or international theatre, translation in the case of artists in exile is "the only" possible political decision giving theatre-makers access to the audience but also a system of creation, production and touring.

Power and Politics

Reflection on translation in theatre is not limited to the artistic practice as such. Translation as an act is a response to a need. This need is partly the result and the source of power relations. The translation is in itself a political decision and action. Making certain plays or texts accessible to a particular audience is a decision taken on a policy base, be it the theatre's policy or a city or a state. Languages divide people into those who can speak directly to others and those who need a mediator/translator to transmit the meaning. The first laboratory of the *One Language* Project focused on exploring how language reflects and expresses these power structures. This reflection process waved from language in everyday life to the sense of othering and colonialism that hides in our language due to "acknowledging" or "censoring" terms and expressions. Participants tried to reflect on why language is political and how the shift in power relations could be tested through theatre. Language is political because it can include or exclude; it defines or determines what is deemed as usual and what is "othered"; it also controls what you know and what you don't have access to. Adopting an official language or language in a country or a cultural policy determines "normal" communication, and without precarious critical thinking, it can mean the marginalisation of cultures and peoples and a way to understand history.

Ayşe Gülsüm Özel, scenography and stage designer, and one of the three facilitators of the project wrote and proposed a case study around the Nuremberg Trials (1945–1946)[2], analysing it as the official birth date of simultaneous interpretation, which was invented as early as 1926. The Nürnberger Prozesse was a series of military tribunals the Allied forces held after World War II under international law and the laws of war. The trials were most notable for the prosecution of prominent members of the political, military, judicial, and economic leadership of Nazi Germany. The three major wartime powers, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union, besides France, which was also awarded a place on the tribunal, agreed on punishment for war crimes during World War II. The trials employed four official languages: English, French, German and Russian. Despite the extensive trial

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2   The case study was written based on several resources: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%BCrnberger_Prozesse, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subsequent_Nuremberg_trials, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/translating-and-interpreting-nuremberg-trials, https://museums.nuernberg.de/memorium-nuremberg-trials/the-legacy-of-nuremberg/birth-of-international-criminal-law/

and error, without the interpretation system, the "six million words" trials would not have been possible and, in turn, revolutionised the way multilingual issues were addressed in tribunals and conferences.

According to the National World War II Museum of New Orleans, "Translation is performed on written works, taking a text in one language and rendering it in another. Translation usually allows for edits and time for consideration and reference. Interpretation is performed on the spoken word, and although there are different types of interpretation, it is often performed extemporaneously without time to consult sources or incorporate edits." It was feared that consecutive interpretation would slow down the proceedings significantly. This led to introducing an entirely new technique, extempore simultaneous interpretation. This interpretation technique requires the interpreter to listen to a speaker in a source (or passive) language and simultaneously translate that speech into another language in real time through headsets and microphones. Interpreters were split into four sections, one for each official language, with three interpreters per section working from the other three languages into the fourth. For instance, the English booth consisted of three interpreters, one working from German, one from French, and one from Russian into English. Defendants who spoke none of the four official languages received consecutive court interpreters.

Many of the participants were former translators, army personnel, and linguists; some were experienced consecutive interpreters, others were ordinary individuals and even recent secondary school graduates who led international lives in multilingual environments. They were chosen based on their broad sense of culture, encyclopedic knowledge, inquisitiveness, and naturally calm disposition. Technically during the process, a yellow lamp signalled, "Speak slower," and a red one was used to request the speaker to repeat the last sentence. Thus, to a certain extent, not only judges and lawyers determined, as generally in trials, the speed of the process, but also the simultaneous interpreters. The defendants reacted differently to the interpretation. Some tried to use flawed interpretations in plea bargaining. Many of the defendants spoke English and other languages, but they used the delay caused by interpretation to gather thoughts, gain time, and perhaps slow proceedings. Furthermore, many thought that the better the interpretation, the better their chances of surviving.

Translation and Understanding

The One Language Project participants presented a scene in two languages through a practical exercise called the 'missing dialogues' led by Ziad Adwan, researcher, theatre director, and one of the project's facilitators. The scene is taken from the play HomeWork, written by Adwan. One character spoke English, which was the lingua

franca of the group, and the other character spoke Arabic, a familiar language for only one part of the participants. The scene presented a woman alone in a hotel talking on the phone with someone who was in the front in a fighting zone because she wanted to eat something sweet and was looking for the jam. Other artistic elements that were present in the scene included sound effects done by one participant, two mimers who "translated" the two characters, and a participant who drew the scenery. It was as if the director had dismantled the scene into separate artistic components: language, movement, and sound. The audience had to recompose the elements to make sense of the scene.

During the closing discussion, the group concluded that non-Arabic-speaking spectators could construct and understand the scene's meaning. The only incomprehensible component that hindered building a relationship with the scene was the word "jam". The Arabic-speaking character was looking for jam. While the spectators understood that she was looking for something, and most of them understood that she was looking for food, no one in the audience could understand that she was looking for jam. The two remaining questions here are: Is it necessary to understand the word "jam" to get the scene's meaning? And can the translation screen only light up the word jam?

Here, we encounter the concept of the "pleasure of finding other ways to understand", but we also should answer many questions through the artistic process: could every story, plot, or character speak or be spoken in another language? Who understands what? And how? Do we all understand the same thing? Is it possible to create (mis)understanding? And is it at all necessary to understand or to be understood? Is it possible to educate the audience to accept and enjoy not understanding? Again, what about text-based theatre? How can we share and enjoy the limit of spoken language?

In text-based theatre, when the text itself is in the centre of the play, or when the artistic choice is to transmit the text as it is, the only solution is to keep it as it is, thus using a surtitle. The question remains: did the screen on stage become so established that it is disturbing to play with it and transform it from being a tool to transmit a text, or can theatre-makers still be free to deal with it as an element of the scene? Can we consider surtitle in theatre as another medium to transmit the text so that it is cued like the other 'languages of theatre' (lighting, sound, costume . . . etc.)?

Translation as a practice

Between 2013 and 2021, Sandra Hetzl has translated twenty-five Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian plays, except for one Egyptian text written in standard Arabic [Fusha]. These dialects are the most familiar to her. The twenty-five texts were translated for public plays or scenic readings, but none were published; as Hetzl

states, Publishing theatre in Germany is, unfortunately, rare. Commissioning is always done either by the writers themselves or through festivals or theatre institutions. Although Hetzl was only sometimes commissioned to do the three steps leading to the projected surtitling on stage, those rare cases led to a clear understanding of how beneficial it is for the text and the relation to the audience if the three steps go through one person's hand. The first is translating a stage version. This means simply translating the text regardless of the sentences' lengths or other surtitling considerations. So, as a stage version, it will also include the scenic instructions. The second step is to create the surtitling version that needs a lot of work, including abbreviating, focusing on fitting all dialogues in a two-line format, sometimes using specific software. It is better when the same person does this abbreviation because they will be more capable of emphasising each sentence in a way that fits the overall language of the play; they will also know better what to take away from the text to make it shorter. Hetzl has done this step for approximately half of the texts she translated.

The third step is to be present at two to three rehearsals. Until this moment in the process, the translator does not meet the theatre company, and they don't know the text's staging; their work is limited to dealing with the text. By participating in rehearsals, the translator tests their work; they can understand the rhythm and emotions. They observe when a sentence is set very quickly or slowly. Sometimes, it also helps to understand situational jokes better. "When I translate any text, be it a theatre play, prose or poetry, I always collect my questions, work on the text and communicate with the writer. Most of the time, I happen to understand much more when this option exists.". "In the times where I had the chance to be present in all three steps, I took it very seriously. Conversely, by the commissioners, translation is often seen as a marginal asset; it is mostly omitted, and translators aren't credited, even though they do very sensitive and creative work on one of the core materials of a piece: The text. As a translator, Hetzl sees her work as crucial to the play and deals with it in that way. "When I translate a play, I read the whole play out loud several times with myself; Sometimes I also do lots of research, and then when it comes to running surtitles during a performance, I feel like I'm something between a DJ and a literary translator. Yet in so many cases, the translator of the piece is not mentioned, neither in the brochure nor in any communication outlet, while light designers, makeup artists, and technicians are".

There are essential differences between translating a text for a printed publication and translating a text that ends in the surtitles on stage. One significant difference is related to the nature of the text. Theatre texts are based on dialogues; still, it is worth mentioning that these dialogues in contemporary Arab theatre are primarily written in a dialect, not in standard Arabic. Hetzl has translated only very few plays from the Arab Region written in Fusha.

"In a way, I find it's a much 'easier' task to translate from colloquial Arabic, compared to translating from Fusha. When translating from colloquial Arabic, I don't need to do all the bridging work I have to do when translating from Fusha. German literary texts subtly jump from colloquial and auditive registers to more written ones, as in German, you can easily write in a colloquial without it becoming slang, dialect, or a deviation from correct German. In Arabic, given the diglossia of the Arabic language(s), meaning the fact that there are always at least two variations of Arabic used (a regional dialect / colloquial form of Arabic and as a written language Modern Standard Arabic) which are primarily isolated from each other. When I transfer a text from Fusha, to get a vivid literary result, I have to add layers of colloquial registers to the German text that weren't necessarily inherent in the more sterile Fusha original. In contrast, when I translate from colloquial Arabic, the situatedness is directly present in the original text. Another significant and unfortunate difference is that when I translate a piece of prose or poetry for publication, it goes through profound external copy editing through a third person before it goes back to me. I can decide on which suggestions of the copy editor I want to adopt. This process is something that the text benefits hugely from. In theatre, there is no time or space for such a process. All translations are done for these one or three nights to flash by in the shining surtitles and then disappear forever. Yet, from my side, I put so as much work into it as if the translation would be meant for eternity."

After 2015, many plays were produced by theatre-makers and writers based in Germany and Europe. That was not the case before 2015. In terms of themes and content, we could describe a tendency for mainly Syrian writers based in Germany to work on a new self-referentiality, where the theatre company and the rehearsals become the play's topic. It is something to be further studied and reflected on, but it could result from a feeling of disconnection with the surroundings held by the artists, of being thrown back on oneself. In the written text, as Spivak argues, "the translator's task is to surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text. (…) ignoring this task is the loss of the literariness and textuality and sensuality of the writing" (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2009). In theatre, this doesn't differ; it just has a whole world taking place on stage, not a text, but bodies, objects, words, movements, gestures, anger and joy, sounds, smells, breathing, and much more. The spoken word is one of what the spectators receive and interpret.

Receiving the theatrical performance is a complex process in which every artistic decision affects the architecture of the theatre space, the psychological state, and the spectator's expectations. The European audience who decides to go to a theatre performance by a writer or director from another culture accepts exposure to that culture. The spectators can base their decision on curiosity, political discourse in the media, stereotypes about the culture from which the artist comes, knowledge, and critical ability to deal with the dominant culture. In all these cases, the goal is the

artistic experience that they will live receiving the artistic proposition. This artistic experience is related to and affected by the artist's own artistic experience during and before the production process and their ability to freely find their language and be aware of all levels of relationship with an audience who does not speak their language.

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